

# Boreas Pass Auto Tour

## Iron Rails: From Bust to Rust

This series of auto tours crosses through National Forest lands and private landowners.

Some of the historic mining sites may contain mine shafts and other dangerous mine workings, most of which are on private land. Visitors should exercise caution when leaving their vehicles.

This 21 ½-mile tour begins 10 miles northeast of Fairplay at the junction of Highway 285 and Park County Road #33.

CHRONOLOGY-BOREAS PASS
1803- Louisiana Territory, land west of Mississippi, purchased from the French
1805- John Purcell found gold in Tarryall Creek
1842- John C. Fremont led expedition into South Park to map Platte River
1849- California gold rush
1858-59- Depressed economy after Panic of 1857 sent gold-seekers west
1859- Colorado gold rush; major find on Tarryall Creek and Blue River
1860-63- Placer mining peaked in South Park, California Gulch and the Blue River Country
1861-65- Civil War
1867- End of most small-claim placer mining
1871- Colorado silver strike
1871- Lechner found coal in South Park
1872- Denver, South Park and Pacific Railway spearheaded by John Evans
1877-79- Leadville silver boom
1879- Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad reached South Park town of Como
1880- 24,000 people in Leadville, silver capital of the U.S
1882- Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad reached town of Breckenridge
1884- Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad reached Leadville over Boreas and Fremont Passes
1905- U.S. Forest Service created within Department of Agriculture
1907- Pike National Forest evolved from South Platte Forest Reserve

1937- Railroad shut down in South Park and over Boreas Pass
1952- Boreas railroad bed converted to an auto road on the Breckenridge side
1956- Boreas railroad bed converted to an auto road on the Como side

## 1. ROCK ROUNDHOUSE OUTLASTS THE RAILS THAT LED TO IT

Como started as a tent town, built by the railroad to house the thousands of workers laboring on the line. Temporarily the final stop, the rails brought hordes of adventures, drifters and opportunists eager to reach Leadville during the height of the silver boom. Some entrepreneurs stayed, built stores and provided services. Little remains of the booming railroad junction that was Como. In its time, the town boasted a large roundhouse (the stone portion still remains though the wooden section was destroyed by a 1935 fire), a depot, the 43-room Pacific Hotel (also destroyed by fire in 1896 and replaced by the current, smaller one), saloons, shops and tenements.

The early residents were Italian immigrants who named the town and the nearby lake after Lake Como in Italy. Coal mining had brought them to Como operating the railroad and mining the coal necessary to run the trains became the primary employment in the area for many years.

*In 1859 the passageway over Breckenridge Pass (now known as Boreas Pass) was hardly more than a trail used by burro pack trains and foot travelers to carry supplies across the Continental Divide. In 1860, crews of men from the Breckenridge and South Park sides of the Pass hacked out a wagon road. Twenty years would pass before the next improvements to the route were made.*

## 2. FUELING THE RAIL-BOUND STALLIONS

In 1871, George Lechner probed the surface northwest of where Como would stand, searching for black coal, not the gold glitter that had crazed early residents. The transcontinental railroad had spurred south from Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Denver the previous year, and coal miners from Europe were riding west, eager to ply their trade and feed the iron horses. Lechner gambled that a railroad line would come to South Park to bring mining supplies in and transport ore back to the Front Range processors. Until the railroad arrived in 1879, Lechner's coal business struggled, but provided needed fuel to local markets.

In that same year, Lechner sold his holdings to the South Park Coal Company, a railroad enterprise. Coal production reached its height during the 1880's, when several additional mines were opened southeast of Como. Explosive gases in the coal mine made the work treacherous.

Tragic fires and explosions marred the history of these operations and contributed to their abandonment by the end of the century.

*In 1873, the Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad began construction of a route to the mineral belt areas in South Park. It was a narrow gauge track (3 feet between the rails rather than the standard gauge of 4 feet 8 1/2 inches) because of the rugged countryside, sharp curves and steep grades along the route. Construction through the Kenosha Pass area occurred in 1879. Later that year, the tracks reached Como, 88 miles from Denver.*

### **3. RAW CAMP TOWNS, HOME TO THE GREEDY AND ROWDY**

The discovery of gold in Tarryall brought scores of fortune seekers expecting to share in the riches. They found a cold welcome at the settlement of Tarryall City, the best sites were claimed and newcomers were not wanted. Hamilton was soon established on the other side of Tarryall Creek. From the start, the two towns were rivals. They refused to build a bridge across the creek (anyone foolish enough to want to visit Tarryall City, the Hamiltonians said, deserved to get his feet wet). They competed for gold and for culture when traveling plays or dignitaries came through the area. Hamilton won out, attaining a larger population in its first year. It had a post office, scores of saloons and gambling houses, and for a time its own mint. John Parsons minted coins valued at \$2.50 and \$5.00 from 1861 until 1863, when he moved to Denver.

Tarryall City was known for little besides its unfriendliness and greed. It did become the seat of Park County government for a short while, but its population never matched its rival across the creek. Despite the district's production of \$2,000,000 worth of gold between 1859 and 1872, Tarryall City was a ghost town by 1873. Hamilton fared little better.

### **4. PEABODY SPUR**

At this junction, the railroad grade and road become one. The railroad spur here served the mining area to the northwest in the shadow of Mt. Silverheels, as ore and concentrates were brought here to be loaded into cars.

### **5. A PANORAMIC PERSPECTIVE**

As mining lagged, the need for railroads lessened. In the 1950's, almost 20 years after the last train crossed the Pass, the Army Corps of Engineers built the existing road which follows the railroad bed. This overlook along the road is named for Grover G. Davis, a young dozer operator killed during the construction of the road. From the pullout, one can see South Park from the same vantage that John Fremont had in 1842. Ranches and hay fields did not stretch below then; instead a valley floor of native grasses and browsing buffalo

might have been evident. Today, ranchers augment their pastures with permits to graze their cattle and sheep on National Forest allotments under a permit system monitored by the Forest Service.

## **6. A CURVE PRESERVED**

This is a good place to stretch one's legs on a short stroll out to Rocky Point. Here, a small stretch of original railroad grade remains unaltered due to expensive rockwork required to widen it for auto travel. (A few back-East rail passengers probably got a little green around the gills as those narrow-gauge cars swayed around this sharp turn.) From Rocky Point, one looks down upon Tarryall Creek and drainages beyond. The old workings of the Fortune Placer are visible to the left. Placer mining was highly dependent upon the "water season". Great labor and expense went into dams, ditches and other structures that served to conduct water to the gold-bearing deposits. The remains of much of the water development activity are still visible below. The ditch routes can be traced as they lead down to the Fortune and other nearby placers. A mile beyond Rocky Point, a side road drops to Selkirk Campground on the valley floor.

## **7. CAUTION OR CATASTROPHE ON THE CURVE**

Given the steep grades and sharp turns of the route up Boreas Pass, train wrecks were a constant danger. To retrieve runaways trains that derailed, temporary spur tracks sometimes had to be built. Cables, ropes, pulleys and chains were used to right and haul the misplaced equipment. In January 1936, two locomotives descending from the Pass at about 20 m.p.h., hit a frozen snowdrift and plunged down the mountain. One of the engines slid 208 feet from the track; the other stopped 50 feet from the track. Temporary grade for the retrieval of these engines is still visible.

## **8. SUMMIT**

In its own way Boreas Station was a bustling location. By 1886 there was a two-room telegraph office, a two story section house and a storehouse, all built from logs cut at the Pass. These stumps are still visible. Walking along the roadside at the Pass today, one sees fallen boards and rotting logs that once held snowdrifts from the tracks. The section house where several workers bunked and a small log building left over from the wagon and stage days still stand. There was a stone engine house with a turntable, coal bin and water tank inside. This was destroyed in a 1909 fire, leaving only the quarried stones now scattered west of the few remaining buildings. A 600 foot snowshed was later extended to 997 feet with doors on the Breckenridge end to keep out drifting snows. In 1898 a depot was built

onto the snowshed for the comfort of boarding passengers. Boreas Station had a post office from January 2, 1896 to January 31, 1906, reported to be the highest in the country.

All these amenities failed to foil Boreas winters. Elevation at the top of the Pass is 11,481 feet. Winds are constant, strong and icy. Snow is unending. The winter of 1898-99 was particularly severe. Snows began early; by November, trains and tracks were under ten feet of snow. Clearing the tracks, always costly and time-consuming became impossible and no train ran between February 6 and April 24, 1899.

Although Boreas Station was all but deserted by 1905, the railroad workers remained at the Pass to keep the tracks open and the trains running.

## **9. FARNHAM AND 7:30 MINE**

1.2 miles beyond the summit was the train station called Farnham. Named for its postmaster, W.H. Farnham, the site boasted little except its dreams. A promotional letter in the *Summit County Journal* by J. B. Farnham (presumably a relative of the postmaster's) confidently touted the town's potential as a resort. *The Breckenridge Daily Journal* gave additional credence to the plan. Alas, no croquet lawns, promenades or fountains were ever built.

Farnham did have a store operated by Wilbur Wood and Calvin Pike. Pike also served as the local agent for the 7:40 Mine, located on the south side of Bald Mountain, about one tenth of a mile northwest of Farnham. This mine was sometimes called the 7:30 Mine after a miner's joke that described heading to work at 7:30 AM and arriving at the mine at 7:30 PM just in time to turn around and head home.

## **10. FILLING STATION**

Water tanks, such as Baker Tank, were common sights along the railways for many years. They fueled the giant engines of the day with steam that kept them alive. Coal-fed fires kept water simmering, steaming and rolling. Loaded "tenders" the small cars behind the train's engine, carried vast amounts of coal and water. As the water was depleted, it needed to be replenished. Depending on the grade and the weight of the load being hauled, stops were usually every 30 miles. The closest water tanks to Baker Tank were 4 miles away at the top of Boreas Pass, 6 miles away in Selkirk and 12.5 miles away in Dickey.

Tanks were placed below natural streams and fed by gravity. The Tank's spout, hinged upright in its resting position, was lowered into the open hatch on the top of the tender. A "flop valve" in the spout opened to release water into the train's tender. The entire operation took only a few minutes.

The tank you see was moved here in 1910 from the Alpine Tunnel when the first tank proved to be too small to quench the thirst of passing engines. When full, Baker Tank held 9,305 gallons of water.

## **11. ARGENTINE**

Five miles from Breckenridge lies Indiana Gulch, a heavily mined area in the second mining boom. The head of the gulch gave rise to Warrior's Mark, the most productive mine in that area. At the western end of Indiana Gulch, one mile west of Warrior's Mark, lies a horseshoe-shaped meadow. Now returned to its natural state, this meadow marks where Colonel S.P. Congers discovered silver in 1879. He named the discovery the Diantha Lodge, after his wife. Within eight months the camp had 42 voting residents.

When the railroad came in 1881 it became known as Argentine, after the mountain to the southwest. It was renamed Bacon after the turn of the century. In 1886, Argentine boasted a store and a post office.

Mine ownership expanded to include companies based in Midwestern and Eastern states. Mining prospered well into the 20th century. By all accounts, Argentine was less rowdy than earlier mining towns. The most exciting events noted in the *Breckenridge Daily Journal* detailed human encounters with bears and mountain lions. Although the town has vanished, sharp-eyed hikers may spot outlines where cabins once stood.

## **12. BARNEY FORD HILL**

The road winds around 1.1 miles past the ruins of the Puzzle Mine and Jacot Sawmill to Barney Ford Hill. The hill is named for a former slave who made a fortune in the mines, lost it in a bust, but persevered to reestablish his wealth. Barney Ford panned for gold in the 1860's and as that boom waned, established one of the finest hotels in Denver, the Inter-Ocean Hotel. Ford enjoyed a significant influence in local and state politics.

The silver and lead carbonate boom in 1880 brought Ford back to Breckenridge. He opened Ford's Chop Stand which quickly became the best restaurant in the area. Though the Chop Stand was destroyed by fire in 1896, Ford's home, considered in its time one of Breckenridge's finest cottages, still stands.

The Washington Mine was located on Barney Ford Hill. Now an interpretive site of the Summit Historical Society, the mine has numerous structures: a shaft house or head frame (sometimes called "the gallows"), changing rooms and a blacksmith deck. The mine produced gold, silver and lead and was worked intermittently until 1971.

### 13. ROTARY SNOWPLOW INTERPRETIVE PARK

On display is a narrow gauge rotary snowplow built in September 1900 for White Pass and Yukon as their rotary #2. The rotary was in service until 1963. The tender is from CB&O steam locomotive #2901, a Pacific locomotive. After the locomotive was scrapped, the tender was used by the Colorado and Southern Railway as an auxiliary tender. Also at the site is a cabin that was built in 1899. It was originally part of the Gold Pan machine shop facilities.

*The Leadville silver boom posed challenges and opportunities for railroad magnates. Competition to serve the area and share in its riches soared. The Denver, South Park and Pacific Railroad headed for the action in 1880 across the rubble of old placer strikes on Tarryall Creek. Rail reached the summit of Boreas Pass in late 1881. Winters were harsh and a few places harsher than the Pass renamed for the God of the North Wind. By September 1882, the line reached Breckenridge and by December 1884, tracks ran into Leadville.*

*Fire accompanied the railroad's progress throughout the mountains. Sparks from locomotives caused major forest fires in 1883, 1893 and 1899. The legacy of those spark-belching, iron horse days paints the Pass today. Aspen trees thrive on disturbance. Fires opened the flanks of these mountains to the seedlings and subsequent stump-sprouting clusters of aspen. The flattened leaf stem of this tree cause the canopy to tremble in the slightest breeze, not as nuggets or flecks, but as the flutter and fall of aspen leaves.*

For more information or an audio CD tour, contact:

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